

GUSMAN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

BY

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The Maurice Gusman Cultural Center, formerly the Olympia Theatre, is located on the Southwest corner of Downtown Miami's busiest intersection at Flagler Street and 2nd Avenue--the original site of the "Airdome Theatre." It was built in 1926 by Paramount Enterprises at a cost of \$1.5 million.

John Eberson, who had designed his first theatre, the Majestic Theatre in Houston, Texas, just two years before, was selected by Paramount as the architect. Eberson departed from the usual theatre-style building and created the first on many "atmospheric" theatres with turrets and towers in Spanish style. It was the most beautiful and elaborately equipped theatre of its time and believed to be the first air conditioned theatre in the South. It has maintained a reputation as an acoustically perfect theatre.

In 1929 the excitement of a twenty-five year presentation of stars gracing the stage at the Olympia began: Sophie Tucker, Joe E. Brown, Martha Raye, Rudy Vallee, Burt Wheeler, Jackie Gleason and even Elvis Presley. Motion pictures were introduced in 1954 under a reorganization branch of Paramount Pictures called the Florida State Theatres until 1971 when its doors closed.

In 1970, the theatre was purchased by Miami philanthropist, Maurice Gusman, for housing the Miami Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Alain Lombard. Renovations totaling \$5 million were under the watchful eye of Miami Beach architect, Morris Lapidus. The Olympia Theatre was renamed to Maurice Gusman Cultural Center and reopened October 21, 1972 with a symphonic tribute to Maurice Gusman. Included on the program for that evening was Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to which the audience thrilled in the acoustically perfect theatre.

In 1975, Maurice Gusman donated the theatre to the City of Miami with the stipulation that the Center be managed by the Department of Off-Street Parking, a semi-autonomous agency of the City of Miami. The long-term friendship of Mr. Gusman and the Off-Street Parking Board Chairman, Colonel Mitchell Wolfson of Wometco Enterprises, was the basis for this unique arrangement. Under the management of this Department, a two year renovation period took place.

In 1977, after 28 years of silence, the only originally installed pipe organ south of Atlanta housed at the Center, was restored. It took 7 years and 100,000 hours to repair the 1,035 pipes of the great Wurlitzer, now maintained by the South Florida Theatre Organ Society.

In 1983, a legislative grant of \$75,000 was approved for construction of a replica of the original ticket booth. Richard Heisenbottle, architect and Spillis, Candela and Partners, interpreted the original plans and after two years of careful planning and management by Roger Carlton of the Department of Off-Street Parking, the dream became a reality. Only the air-conditioning and computerization of the booth does not hold true to the original 1925 booth; otherwise, it is exact.

The Department of Off-Street Parking continues its association with the Center under the Chairmanship of Eduardo Padron and Director, Clark Cook. The Center, now called Gusman Center for the Performing Arts, was a "venue" house from 1977 until 1984 when it presented its first season under the direction of Darrell Calvin, its Managing Director.

Gusman Center for the Performing Arts is on the National Historic Register.